

## Let's Talk Gardening

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The Country Gardener

### Dog-Days-of-Summer Gardening

I don't know if you planted any cantaloupes this summer or not, but I did and I know at least one other reader who did. She probably has picked one of them by now. I think she planted the Ambrosia variety and if she did, she's in for a real treat. She wrote and asked how you know when to pick them. You know it's time to pick them when they turn that beautiful golden-yellow, you can smell them, and they just slip off the vine (when you lift the melon, it just comes right off the vine with no effort.) Of course, I let Mother Nature help me know when mine are ripe. The raccoons tell me. They know the melons are ripe one day before I do. They climb the fence and eat the whole melon from the inside out—I don't know how, but all they leave is the hollow rind...like a deflated basketball. They got one last week and now I've gotta design a fence to keep them from getting MY share. Gonna get right on that. If you have water melons, you know to pick them when the bottom of the melon turns from white to yellow. You can thump it if you want to, but do you really know what to listen for??? Most people don't. You listen for a dead, muted sound. If the melon "rings" it's not ripe yet.

The Fredericksburg peaches were great this year, weren't they? You did go pick some, didn't you? Aw, shame on you. There's still time if you want to make some preserves or a cobbler or two. If you go to the right place, you can even pick some blackberries. They're especially good this year, too.

You might wanna consider starting some cuttings if you have some particular plants that you'd like to have around next year. There is no special time of year that you take cuttings. The main thing is that you take the cutting from a part of the plant that hasn't bloomed yet. Remove a tip that contains 3-4 sets of leaves. Take off the lower 2 sets of leaves. Dip the cut end in a rooting hormone powder (available at the nursery). This powder helps the cutting develop new roots quickly. Use a pencil and make a hole in the potting soil in a 2-3 inch pot. Stick the cutting in and firm the soil around it. Be sure to use a sterile potting medium. It doesn't have to be soil—it can be sand, perlite, or vermiculite. Just be sure that it's sterile and does not contain any fertilizer. Water it well and place it in a spot where there is bright light, but no direct sun. If you want to reduce moisture loss, place a plastic bag over the pot. Keep the cutting moist but not wet—misting with a spray bottle is usually the best way. When the cutting puts on new leaves, you know that it has established a few roots. After you see about 3-4 new leaves, add a weak solution of fertilizer to the medium. When the cutting gets about 5-6 inches tall, you can transplant it into a larger pot and feed and water it normally.

Back when I was going through the Master Gardener training program, I remember asking Dr. Calvin Finch if there were only one thing that he could do to improve or help his gardening, what would it be. His answer? Mulch. You just can't say too many good things about mulching. It can be almost any organic material that is available to you. Personally, I ask the tree-trimming company to drop off the mulch in their trucks in my yard. There's quite a pile out there right now because I just haven't had the time to spread it around. You can buy mulch and have it delivered if you like. It runs from \$15 to about \$25 per cubic yard. Leaves work well, too. Mulch prevents weed seeds from sprouting—if you can keep the sunlight off the seeds, they can't sprout. If you have a 3-4-inch layer of mulch, the moisture in the soil doesn't evaporate. It will also keep the temperature of the soil about 20 degrees cooler. It prevents erosion if it's heavy enough to not float off in a rainstorm. Vegetables stay cleaner and are less likely to rot if they're lying on a bed of leaves. Mulch decomposes in about 6-8 months and provides micronutrients to the soil. It's Mother Nature's way of recycling.

Send your comments and/or questions to [gardener@gvtc.com](mailto:gardener@gvtc.com).